What's the biggest advantage of shipping over the water? Most would say cost. There are massive economies of scale at play in water shipping. Large ships can often have the lowest cost per-ton-mile compared to other modes. However, be mindful of storage fees at seaports, which can add up if your freight needs to sit in storage for a while, especially if it all arrives at the same time.

Water transport is ideal for transporting heavy, bulk freight. Weight can be an issue for other modes, but it is typically not a problem for water transport. Because of the sheer size or volume of some products being shipped — including grain, minerals, metals, ores, steel coils and heavy machinery — ship or barge often makes the most sense.

Water transport is only a viable option if your shipping origin and destination are located on a navigable waterway. Upon reaching land, you may need to arrange transportation via truck or rail to get your product to its final destination.

One of the major disadvantages of water transport is not being able to track the exact location of your shipments. While technology is improving, depending on your carrier, tracking the exact location of your shipments on the water can be more challenging than other modes.

Another downside of shipping by barge or ship is that it can be difficult to predict and control the transit times. Congestion along the route or at ports or unplanned outages caused by an aging infrastructure of inland waterways can end up causing delays. Weather related issues can also seriously impact transit times. Although, if you are not in a rush, transit time may not be a major concern.

Marine transport is considered one of the most environmentally responsible shipping modes. When you compare total volume of emissions across all types of freight transportation, marine transport often has the lowest impact. Plus, there have been significant technological improvements in engine efficiency, hull design and carrying capacity — all leading to a reduction in emissions and an increase in fuel efficiency.